

CHAPTER X

POETRY

POETS AND POETICAL COMPOSITION

The Rwala love to hear, recite, and compose poems, which they call *kašâjed* (sing., *kašide*). A verse is called *kâf*. It usually consists of two halves, the first being *nuss al-kâf* and the second, which is always rhymed, *âher al-kâf*, being *kâf at-tâli*. The poet says of himself: "I composed a poem, *kašatt* or *kilt al-kašide*." Sometimes a poet will not say that he composed (a poem), *kašad*, but merely that he uttered (a poem), *kâl*. The audience say to the poet: "Reveal us thy poem, *bdaha 'alejna*." If a begging poet comes to a chief in whose honor he has composed a poem, he begins by saying: "There are a few words. O chief! which I should like to disclose to thee, O long-living one! *endi ãlêmât já šejh abri ebdiha 'alejk já řawil al-'omr*." "Out with it! *hatah*." And the poet in a nasal voice begins to recite his poem. The first words he blurts out, the next he half swallows, and the last he utters in a falsetto. If the chief likes the poem, its author gets a reward. The begging poets are not held in much esteem, being reproached for their insatiability, for their disregard of honesty in praising even scamps for a reward, and also because they lie and steal. They steal the ideas, sentences, and even whole verses of others. It often happens that the hearers assail such a poet with the words: "Thou liest. Thou stolest it from So-and-So!" The poet defends himself, calling on others to be his witnesses, but the confidence of his hearers is gone, and they say: "A poet is a liar, *kašâd kaddâb*." When the poet learns that his composition or some of his verses are claimed by somebody else, he complains to the chiefs or even in the courts, but they all refuse to listen on the ground that a poet cannot be trusted.

On hearing a new poem the Bedquins inquire its author's name, *limin hâđi*. An anonymous poem is called *mağhûla*.

A poem is but rarely written down. As a rule the poet's friends learn it by heart, and others learn from them. Every Bedouin knows several poems but hardly ever the whole of

538 any. He usually recites from six to ten verses and then says that perhaps someone else knows the rest. Hence, since every long poem must be collected piecemeal from a number of men, the order of the individual verses can seldom be accurately established. If two Bedouins know the same verses of the same poem, they never recite them in exactly the same way but change the original words and often whole verses. Sometimes these changes are due to later improvements by the poet himself, but in most cases his unconscientious or careless friends are to blame. The Bedouins often quarrel as to the original wording of the verses and frequently ask the poet himself about this, but even he is not always absolutely sure. Often the poet insists that a verse was at first worded in such and such a way, but his friends contradict him. This makes him exclaim that all the versions are good and original, and he ends by appealing to the omniscience of Allāh. After hearing this answer from a number of poets, I gave up the search for the original wording, as the task is not only most difficult but quite useless. At other times I found that the poet himself knew barely the first few verses of his own poem. The rest he had forgotten and was glad that his friends remembered more than he. Only poems dealing with subjects of common interest become widely known and are preserved, whereas poems describing particular events are recited only by the persons concerned and fall into oblivion when these persons are dead.

[181] It cannot be denied that the Bedouins are poetically gifted. The composing of all kinds of ditties and songs is mere play to them, and they do not hesitate even at longer poems. They also hold that the words used in a poem must be out of the ordinary, not those heard in common everyday life. The more unusual words the Bedouin can put into his composition, the better he thinks it. The poet therefore revises every verse most painstakingly, repeats it many times, substitutes some words for others, and asks the opinion of his friends before producing his poem.

The Rwejli always explains the reason or occasion of the origin of every poem, believing that the poet had some motive for its composition. Often he forms his own opinion as to the origin of some old poem simply from its contents and is firmly convinced that he is not mistaken, and yet no one but the poet himself could say what induced him to compose it.

- 539^k 18. The eye is a spring, but to a friend it will not give drink,
 577^x Though he be the best of friends to thee.
19. Share thy booty with the captive who comes to thee,
 For, behold, what he will say of thee will benefit thee.
20. All creatures are doomed in the end to die,
 For thus it is written with the keeper of the records of
21. The slayer of the enemies will not run from them [fate.
 And will never relent as long as his hand holds a weapon.
22. Some men thou shouldst compel to abstain from evil!
 Behold, an aggressor often inherits peace.
23. Guide the desire—hold not back the youth,
 For, behold, a youth whose desires slacken will be de-
24. Thou didst not lament before drowning; [stroyed.
 Survey the ford and learn to swim.
25. The desire hidden in thy breast
 Will come out on a night's march and hold a lamp to thee.
26. Ah, how I grieve for him who has forgotten
 To avenge a wrong and, in affluence resting, remains calm!
28. When thou hast pacified a man, beware of doing so
 second time,
 For a saber pointed downwards is a key to violence.

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This poem is anonymous. Ġwād al-Ġni's statement that it was written by aš-Šerif Barakât was opposed by 'Awde al-Kwēċbi and Hmâr. Prince an-Nûri, however, thought its author was a Bedouin of one of the tribes encamped on both banks of the Euphrates, as the ford mentioned is called *maĥâza*, a common word for ford in southern Mesopotamia. An-Nûri's opinion seems to be correct, because the consonant *ġ*, which a sherif from either al-Medîna or Mecca would never have omitted, is lacking in the poem, and also because the whole moral tone is nearer the views of the free Bedouins than the exaggerated sanctity of the sherifs. I took it down according to the recitation of an-Nûri, Hmâr, 'Awde, and Ġwād, each of whom knew a few verses of the poem but none the whole of it. None of them could remember the verse beginning with the consonant *jâ* (27).—The whole poem has 28 verses rhyming on *âhi*, and each verse begins with a consonant in the order of the Arabic alphabet, excepting the sixth, ninth, eighteenth, and twenty-eighth verses, in which the second or third syllable begins with the appropriate consonant. The first two verses excepted, each of the others conveys some moral precept for life.